Oral history with 73 year old male, Concord, Massachusetts (Transcription)

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Speaker: "kitchen rackets" which were nothing more than Saturday night dances in somebody's house, and the Italians had their big christenings on a Sunday afternoon and everybody went to those. When it was decided whose house they were going to hold the "kitchen racket" in this week, everybody from the area would congregate at that house on Saturday night. The first thing they would do is pick up the kitchen stove and take it outdoors. We didn't have furnaces in those days, they were all stoves and fireplaces but mostly stoves. They took the stove outdoors to get it out of the way because they danced in the kitchen. Downstairs they would have a keg of beer, and all the women that went dancing would be sitting in the living room and dining room, and the men would be in the kitchen. There would be wine available for the women. I never saw liquor abused at anything back there at all. The music was supplied by people playing accordions and violins. They danced what we called

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Speaker: square dancing, they were jigs and reels and eight-hands around. It was a great lively time. Quite often with the rhythm of the music and the action, there would be a question whether the floor in the kitchen was going to hold up. They would go down to the cellar and get a pole and stick it under the floor. As a matter of fact, the house I lived in on Grant Street, I remember them doing it to the kitchen floor there, putting a post under it, and I bet it's still there. As far as the wakes go, when a person died then it was a great

concern to everybody in the neighborhood. They were all disturbed and upset about it. All the women would be bringing over cakes and things because the whole neighborhood went to the wakes. And they stayed there. People made it a point that the body was never left unattended. There-was somebody there all the time so the folks were kept busy to try to make it easier. It was a very solemn affair. The body would be in the living room, most of the women would be in the living room and dining room, and the men would be out in the kitchen. Quite often there would be a bottle of whiskey in the pantry and they would go in and help themselves to a little shot of it. Stories would be told out in the kitchen and laughter in the kitchen. No disrespect, in fact, just the opposite. It was a real family affair and death was accepted as something that had to be, but the deceased and the family were never left alone for a minute until the funeral was over. All the nationalities were in it together and had great concern for each other.

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Speaker: The kids today are at a disadvantage in my opinion because the town has grown up so much they don't have what we had. We used to play baseball in what we called the cattle show field, which was a big acreage up at the end of Belknap and Elsinore Streets. It had once been the cattle show grounds and the circuses used to come there, even Barnum & Bailey. I can remember the circus trains being put on sidings there down by Wilson Lumber, and all the elephants, early in the morning, being marched up Belknap Street to the cattle show grounds where the tents were pitched. It was a very active place up there and prior to that there was a half mile racetrack up there. I remember one race on that racetrack, sulky racing, only one so it must have been the last race there. And prior to my time, there was a big building on there called Agricultural Hall. I never saw it, but there was a big granite cellar hole all my childhood and that was a great play place for us kids. We used to play scrub, that's a baseball game. The kids today wouldn't know what scrub is. We just called it scrub 1, scrub 2, and scrub 3 and so forth; and no. 1 would be

the batter, no. 2 would be the pitcher, and no. 3 was the catcher and so forth. We would play run-sheep-run and steal-the-eggs; but the kids today would get run over if they tried doing that on the streets today. I never swam in my life strangely enough and yet I grew up in a canoe. There were swimming holes right at the cattle show grounds in the river there. A lot of us fellows in those days

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Speaker: used to pick up spare money by trapping. Muskrats, skunks, mink, and raccoons were plentiful, and trapping was quite a big business among the young fellows. That's where we got our pocket money. Their folks didn't give it to them because they didn't have it to give. In those days, we'd get $2.50 for a muskrat skin, the same for a skunk, and $18 for a mink so we spent a lot of time in the river trapping and fishing. Really I grew up in a canoe, I never swam in my life, isn't that strange? I tipped over a number of times and I just grabbed the canoe. Everybody raised chickens and quite a few raised pigs for family use. That was a chore I didn't like, to get sent out to chop the head off a rooster to have for Sunday dinner. It wasn't one of the pleasant memories, I tell you, but we had to do it because it was a source of food. Nobody was badly off but nobody had any money either. We never thought of ourselves being poor and yet we had no money. My father had a bicycle, a New Englander, and our neighbor, Bob Woodlock, had a Columbia that they rode to work. They both thought they had the best bike, of course. On Cottage Lane there was an area with a small group of houses that was always called "the patch". Along one of the railroad sidings, there was some holding pens for cattle, and I can remember cattle being driven down from Nine Acre Corner, up Grant Street, across the tracks over to the holding pens on Cottage Lane. There usually would be one or two cattle cars standing on the siding and they would load the cattle into the cattle cars.

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Speaker: At the railroad crossings, there was what you called shanties, little buildings about five foot square, and there would be a man in that around the clock, eight hour shifts, three shifts a day. My father was a crossing tender in his later years. They manually operated the gates. In between trains there were three or four men in there, squeezed in believe me, around a little bit of a table playing a card game. Many times I had to pitch hit for my father, and I would tend crossing as a young fellow. They were called gate tenders. They picked up the mail from the train too. The trains would fly through there, one of them was Concord's pride and joy called "The Minuteman". It was called that because it's schedule called for a mile a minute. It came through Concord every afternoon, late in the afternoon. As it went through the town, the man on the baggage car would have the door open and the mailbag for Concord sitting on the edge of the door, and just as he got by the crossing, he would kick that bag out and it would go flying across the field. And then he immediately pulled a steel arm up that stuck out from the car and up ahead of him would be a mailbag that was tied in the middle, and this arm on the car would snag that bag off its moorings there and off it went at a mile a minute. Down on Grant Street, there was a blacksmith shop owned by <gap> I believe his son, <gap> is still living out in California. They shod horses there. It was a picture postcard sort of a blacksmith's shop. It was swayed back it was so old, and it was partially caved in and out on one side was a big mound of discarded horseshoes. Down the street on Sudbury Road was

Speaker: another blacksmith's shop owned by <gap> and his father. And that was as neat as a pin. That was just at the entrance of where Stop and Shop is now. Out in front there was a great big granite, circular rock on which they put the iron tires on the wheels. It was quite an operation. <unintelligible text> Speaking of horseshoes, it was one of the sports of the older men particularly. They would play every evening, two men to a team. They

played from early spring until late fall. In the fall when it got dark and they couldn't see so well, they would light bonfires behind the stakes so they could see what they were pitching at. They took it quite seriously. They were real horseshoes, they weren't bought shoes. And speaking of the racetrack, one of the things that comes back to me is the mud turtles, great big snapping mud turtles that must have weighed 40 lbs.. They would come up from the river each spring, and they would dig into the elevated side of the racetrack and go in there, lay their eggs, cover the hole up again, and off they would go back to the river. The sun and the heat of the ground would hatch those eggs. I must say many times we dug the eggs out and we were amazed at them. They were sort of rubbery, tough-like; they didn't have a brittle shell like a hen's egg. The hurdy-gurdy man used to come around. He had a horsedrawn little vehicle with a hurdy-gurdy that looked like an organ with a crank on it. He would stand and crank away and the music would come out, and the womenfolk would be out on their piazzas listening to him. Sometimes he had a little monkey with him, and they would give him a little bit of money. It was a nice thing to remember.

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Speaker: The ladder man--I always felt he came from Waltham. He had a pair of horses on a wagon almost like a firetruck. As soon as he showed up on Grant Street, the first person would say here comes the ladder man it's going to rain. I don't know if that was true or not. There was also a rag man from Waltham, a likeable little fellow. He had a horse and wagon that went around. He picked up all the rags and bottles, and we kids would try to find bottles because he would be around on Saturday and we would try to sell them to him for 2 a bottle. More pocket money. We would shoot over to <gap> store. His name was <gap> and he had a fruit store across from the depot. There were four stores right along there on Thoreau Street, <gap>'s Meat Market and <gap> Grocery store in one building and Cutler's Grocery store and <gap>'s fruit store in the other. That's where we bought our food. <gap> had penny candy and ice cream. He was quite a local character. Concord was

sort of divided into sections. "Back of the depot" was the area I told you about, and further up Sudbury Road near Riverdale Road was called Hubbardville. There was a man named Hubbard that used to live there originally. That area went all the way up Fairhaven Road and Potter Street. Then up Thoreau Street around Willow Street and those side streets was called Herringville, and we called the people Herring Chokers. They probably came from Nova Scotia. Then there was the East Quarter, which was down Old Bedford Road and that area. They were all separate and they all had their own baseball teams.

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Speaker: Baseball was a big thing in those days. The town team was managed by <gap>, who started Lumber Co.. Everybody in town liked <gap>. The big rivalry was Concord and Maynard. When those games were played, everybody from both towns was there. <gap> lived on Sudbury Road, and in the winter time he got around in a horse and sleigh. He drove like a madman. When he could, he would get <gap> to drive for him. They would have a big bear rug over their knees. I remember a time when they went around Snow's corner downtown wide open, and the sleigh tipped over. That was quite a sensation in town for a while. end of excerpt M11 <end?>